

This One Dumb Guy I know

by

Gabriel D. W. Wollenburg

I.

If there was one thing that I knew for sure it was that Benny Krugman would never amount to much of anything. Really. Benny was a short, curly-haired guy with a Jewish-looking nose, but he wasn't Jewish. That isn't why he'll never amount to anything.

Benny will never amount to anything because he doesn't do things the right way. I have a story about Benny that I like to tell to emphasize that point. Let me set some stuff up first.

You know what Benny looks like, mostly. He's short and Jewish looking, even though he's mostly Protestant. If you ask

him he'll say that he's agnostic, but I don't think he knows what that really means. Benny doesn't believe in anything, except for his own dumb ideas: like the first time Benny smoked pot. He came to me, real scared, and asked me a question.

"You know that I smoke pot now, right?"

What a stupid question. I was with him. I saw him. I knew, all right. "Yeah, why?"

"Well, you know... I've been having bad dreams lately. I mean-- since then."

I should probably explain something about Benny and me. Like I said, Benny and I lived together for two years. We were kinda like friends. But, don't get me wrong. I don't like him or anything. We were friends, but I mean, we didn't go out to the park and push each other on the swings or nothing, but he looked up to me. I don't like him or anything. He would ask me questions about stuff when he didn't know what he should do. I'm like that. People come and ask me stuff. I know a lot of things. I can tell you all about photosynthesis. I don't think that

a lot of people can tell you about that, not right off the top of their heads, anyway.

So Benny kinda looked up to me. He came to me for advice a lot of the time. So anyway, Benny had just started telling be about his bad dreams.

"Well, you know... I've been having bad dreams lately. I mean-- since then."

"Since you first started smoking pot?" I like to make sure I know absolutely what people are talking about before I give them advice.

"Yeah. I mean... I just wanna know.... " Benny's face became even more ashen than it usually was. "I don't wanna go to hell."

What a stupid question. I just wanted to laugh at him. But I didn't, you know, because I'm not a prick. You gotta just try to understand where people are coming from sometimes. Just because a person comes off like a total asshole to you, doesn't mean that they don't make sense in their own stupid

way. So I swallowed a laugh and asked him "Do you mean for smoking pot?" I just like to be sure, like I said.

Benny didn't answer, like he did when he didn't need to say yes. That was fine.

"It's against the law, not a sin." I said. "Just because something is against the law, doesn't mean it's a mortal sin."

"Well, I know..."

"You don't go to hell for speeding. And I've seen you drive. When you want it to, that stupid car of yours will speed."

"Yeah I guess." Benny said. Then I heard him roll over and pretend to try to sleep. I knew he was still listening though. Just to make sure he still knew who was the boss, I figured I had better make fun of him a little, you know, jab him a few times. You have to, otherwise stuff like that can turn out to be a moment. I didn't want the little guy to think that he and I just had a moment.

"Although," I said, "You might go to hell for using illegal fireworks."

So it's obvious that Benny believes in God in a more traditional sense. I don't have a problem with that. A guy can believe what he wants. I personally believe in God, so if you have a problem with that, maybe you'd better read something else.

I first became aware that Benny would never amount to anything when he got kicked out of school. It was funny. To this day, he blames the university. Or the weather. Or something else. Hey, I hate walking to class in the rain as much as the next guy, but you can't blame nature for getting a D in Drawing One.

Benny wants to be an artist. I told him once that you can't study to be an artist. He didn't agree with that. Like I usually do when he is wrong, I corrected him.

"No you can't Benny." I told him, "You can learn to draw good, and you can learn how to mix paint at school, but you can't be taught to be an artist."

Benny started giving me some kind of "Art is a unique way of seeing" crap. I wanted to wring his neck. He really didn't know anything.

"No, art is not craft. A craft can be taught. A unique way of seeing can be taught. But an artist has to be able to put expression and feeling into his work. You can't be taught that." Benny listened to me. His silence was like admitting that he didn't know anything and that I should tell him what he should think.

"It's like trying to write a paper for a book that you haven't read or don't like. The teacher tries to give every one in class a fair assignment, but some people liked the book, so it will be easier for them to write the paper. Do you see it?"

Benny was quiet for a second. He sure thinks slowly. "Sure, I guess. I don't like a lot of assignments..." He went back to his sketch pad and kept drawing.

"What are you doing?" I asked him as I started to unload my books from my bag.

"Practicing." Benny said. He just didn't get it.

Benny's like that. He doesn't create art, he practices it. That's part of why he will never amount to anything.

Me and Benny have a friend named Paul. Paul is a guy, you know, he's one of the guys. He's OK. He's our friend.

Paul is really more of my friend anyway. He likes me better. He knows that Benny will never amount to anything anyway, too. Paul will amount to something some day. He gets stuff done; he's very self motivated. Paul is into those Marketing clubs, you know, like AMA. He's a thinker. I like Paul. We eat lunch together.

Paul asked me the other day what Benny is up to. I think he is living in his car. Paul shook his head when I told him that. "Benny's pretty fucked up."

"I know. I kinda feel sorry for that, but it's his own fault."

II.

Benny Krugman's mom is part of the reason why Benny is never going to amount to anything. She is a nice lady I guess. Her name is Kelli and she looks a lot like Benny, only she doesn't wear as thick of glasses. She's crazy though-- not legally or anything, but she could be, if anyone ever gave her the tests.

The first time I met Kelli she was standing behind a tree. Benny and I were going to his house to get some money and something from Benny's room. When she saw us pulling up his driveway, and she saw he wasn't alone, she ran behind a tree.

"She probably doesn't want you to see her in what she is wearing," Benny explained to me. I wanted to laugh at how stupid she was for thinking I cared what Benny Krugman's mom wore when she did garden work. What, was she supposed to be wearing a sunbonnet or something?

We got out of Benny's crappy tan car and walked up the stairs to his porch.

"Hi Mom." Benny said to her. "This is Kevin."

"Hi." I said to the tree.

The tree shook a little.

Benny and I went into the house. Benny's house was real dirty. It wasn't brown with filth or anything, but it was a pretty sloppy. They had a kitchen table that I don't think that they ever had family meals there-- not for a long time, anyway. There was a lot of stuff piled on it, and there were three open boxes of cereal standing on one side of the table. The tops of the boxes and the bags were wide open, so the cereal could go stale and get bad real fast. There were about eight days worth of dishes, some clean some dirty stacked on the counter by the sink.

There were two ways out of the kitchen: one obviously lead into the living room, I could hear the TV, while the other was covered by a curtain.

"What's in here?" I asked Benny gesturing to the curtained room.

"That's the wrestling room," said Benny. I pushed the curtain back enough to see, and sure enough, there were blue

mats on the floor with a big white circle in the middle of the room.

"My brothers are really into wrestling. They wrestle for the high-school."

"Didn't you wrestle?" I teased him. I knew that he was the cameraman who recorded the matches for the coach. Benny really never made the team, even though he really wanted to. He wasn't real athletically built.

"Whatever," said Benny. He lead me into the living room and then upstairs to his bed-room, pointing at things and explaining them as we passed them.

"That is our computer." We went up the stairs. "There is the Nintendo-- we don't have any good games though... over there is the spare bathroom. My dad has been building that for ten years. It doesn't have running water yet." Benny took me down a long hallway where the ceiling got lower the farther down we went. "And this is my room," he said, "But nothing ever happened in here." He smiled a big stupid smile like he had just said something real funny.

I saw his dresser. On top of it was a whole bunch of action figures stuck in action poses to the top with some kind of paste.

"Cool, I said, going over to the dresser. "You've got a Mr. Miracle first series figure! Do you have any idea how much that's worth?"

"About 75 dollars," he said, "I got it for ten bucks, from a little kid. But mine's not worth that much. I kinda screwed it up when I tried to paint the new costume on him."

It was true. The action toy had a really bad paint job. It looked like he had tried to paint it with a wet doughnut. "Yeah," I said, "but you still got it, and you got a Superman, and a Bat-Man, and a Flash, and wow! A Green Arrow!" They all had been painted and ruined. It was too bad really, most of them still had the original capes and stuff. Except for the paint job, they were in pretty good shape.

Benny shrugged like his toys weren't that cool, even though they were, and started digging around under his bed for something. That pisses me off. I mean, you try to give a guy

credit for something and he just shrugs you off. Some people don't know when they got something.

"Here it is," Benny said, tossing out a bunch of clothes from under his bed. He pulled a comic long-box out from under his bed, opened it and found what we had come for. "Nth Man numbers 10 through 13. Near mint condition, still -bagged." He handed them to me.

If you have never read Nth man comics it's too bad. They're really good. I had missed three issues and Benny had found them for me at a convention, so he bought them for me.

"How much do you want for them?" I asked.

"You can have them." Benny said, giving me one of his idiot grins, "I found them in a dollar box."

That was cool, because I didn't have any money anyway, but I had kind of figured that he wouldn't make me pay for them. He's dumb that way.

When we went back down stairs, Kelli had come in from the yard. She hadn't changed or anything, so I figure she must

have decided that she didn't look that silly after all. Like I said, not that I cared.

"Bye Mom," Benny said as he made out for the front door.

"Just a second Benny." She set down her trowel. "When are you going to clean your car? You let people in that car with out cleaning it? Don't you feel stupid?"

"No." Benny mumbled, turning red and looking at his shoes. He did feel stupid, but not until Kelli had mentioned it.

"That's OK, Mrs. Krugman..."

"Call me Kelli."

"OK. It's OK, My car looks the same way, mostly." It was a lie. My car wasn't half as full of garbage as Benny's was. Benny never cleaned his car.

Kelli looked at me and kind of tilted her head a little, like she was thinking real hard. "Weren't you in that play at the high school last fall?"

"*Up the Down Staircase?* Yep I was."

"You were on the stage the whole time. That must have been really hard. You were great."

I couldn't believe she was still talking about that. It was ten months ago. Nobody cared about that anymore. Some people remember stupid things. Ten months ago I probably would have just said thank you, but I didn't want to talk about it so I figured I'd just answer: "It was mostly all improv. I only had about six pages of lines to remember."

"Well that's six more pages than Benny could have gotten right-- isn't it Benny?" He was still red faced and obviously feeling stupid.

I shrugged.

"Do you boys want something to eat?" Kelli asked us.

"No." Benny mumbled to the floor.

"No thanks, really, we gotta get going." I told her. Just because a person feels stupid, doesn't mean you don't have to be nice.

The next year Benny tried out for the fall musical and got a part. He only had about six pages of lines to remember, but he screwed up four times.

III.

I said before how Benny and I were roommates for two years. We weren't buddies or anything, but it isn't like we wouldn't talk to one another. Well, one night, Benny comes to me and tells me that he wants to be a writer. He says that he's already sent a column into a magazine, and they want to pay him to write a column about comic books for them. I figured that was probably good for Benny, he's not really good at anything else except for comics, and if they wanted to pay him, all the better. He mentioned it one night, like I said, and then we both forgot about it.

So two weeks later, Paul and I were studying in My room, when Benny opened the door and came in looking all excited. He tossed a copy of *Faux* magazine at me and stood

there grinning like some kind of idiot who just won a bunny at the state fair.

I picked up the magazine and tossed it back at Benny.

"What?"

Benny tossed the magazine back. "Page 15."

Paul got up and left. Nobody noticed. He was good at that.

I turned to page 15. The column was titled: "Nth Man, Marvel's Undiscovered Treat!"

"You got published in stupid *Faux* magazine? No wonder they are paying you a lousy \$35 a column. "

"It's better than you are doing."

"I'd rather do nothing than this. This is embarrassing."

"It's still better than you are doing."

"I don't think so. This is worse if you ask me. You're pretty stupid for taking this job."

Then Benny did something that he had never done at me before. His eyebrow lowered, his eyes sunk, his lips tightened and his cheeks fell. He came at me. His arms swinging grabbing

for the magazine, and pushing me back at the same time. I'd have usually pounded anyone who did that to me, especially in my own room, but Benny took me by surprise so I just sat there in my desk-chair. I took two punches to the mid-section. When I finally caught on to what was happening Benny had already run out of the room.

I wondered where he thought he was going, and who the hell he thought he was... fighting with me... what an idiot.

I also wondered where Paul went.

I found out later that Benny had gone and driven home to show his mom his first publication. Judging from Benny's attitude when he got back to our room, She must have been less impressed than I was.

I should admit that I was rather impressed by Benny's article, not that I would tell him that. It was very well written and funny and a fair review. I mean, it was pretty great. It was what every on-again, off-again comics collector needed, but I couldn't admit that to Benny, or he might think that I liked him. But really *Faux* magazine is no place to get your start. It's a

stupid rag that nobody smart would read anyway. They sell it in grocery stores.

Paul told me that he thought the review was OK, even though he didn't understand anything about comics. Paul didn't think that *Faux* was such and awful place to get a start. "I mean," he said, "it's a start, and besides, they sell it in every grocery store, right?"

IV.

Benny was up late one night a couple of months later, he was working on my computer on his column for *Faux*. I had to help him fax it to them. It was about 3:30.

"You just gotta choose "fax" from the Apple menu, stupid. I showed you that before."

"I know," Benny said. "I just always forget."

"Well you should remember, because I might not always be up in time for your deadline... dumb-ass."

Benny was quiet. "So do you still think I'm stupid for taking this job?"

"I guess not. Your writing is fit for it."

Benny's eyebrow fell again, in sort of a "what the hell does that mean?" kind of expression. He glared at the fax status readout, waiting for the computer to finish sending his article, not saying anything. I went to bed.

Benny was gone when I woke up. It was strange, because Benny always slept later than I did. I am used to getting up and running off to whatever before Benny got up. I took advantage of the fact that Benny was gone to listen to some music. I like to listen to music in the morning-- a lot more than I like talking to people. I don't much like talking to people first thing in the morning. I need about an hour to wake up and thaw out, or whatever, and then I will talk.

That's why I got so irritated when the phone rang. Anybody worth talking to knows me well enough not to call me in the morning. I answered the phone quickly, because the ring irritated me more than the thought of having to talk to whoever was on the other end. Somebody should make a phone

that knows better than to ring so loud when it doesn't have to.

Anyway, I answered it.

"What?" I asked

"Benny Krugman?"

"No."

"Is this Benny Krugman's phone number?"

"Yes."

"Is he available."

"No."

"Do you know when I might be able to reach him? This is *Faux* magazine calling."

"No."

"Can I leave a message?"

"Sure."

"Benny has got to re-fax us his article for this deadline, OK? It is very important that he get it to us by the end of the day. He has to send that to us as soon as possible. Otherwise he can call us, OK?"

"Yeah."

"Can you make sure he knows that?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you, good bye."

As I hung up the door to my room swung open and Benny walked in. He was eating a Bagel or something. "Who were you talking to?"

I glared at him. It was too early to be playing personal secretary. "No one." I grumbled. I would tell him later. Benny shrugged and sat down in my recliner chair and started to read a comic book. I went to take a shower before the lines got too long.

I hate it when the lines at the shower are too long. You can only stand so long waiting for people who have all day to finish up so you can hurry and shower and get to class. And to make it even less pleasant, some of them talk to each other, and laugh, or sing, and have fun in the morning. That bothers me, because, like I said, I don't much like talking to people in the morning. Some people don't know when it's OK to talk. That annoys me.

You have to stand by the urinal in the guy's showers so that you don't lose your place in line. If you lose your place in line, you can sit in the bathroom waiting for a very long time. There are days when the wait is almost not worth the trouble. A person can go a few days without a shower every so often, and no one will ever know.

I waited for a half hour before I finally got to take a six minute shower and run off to my English 141 class. Benny wasn't in the room when I got dressed.

Five o'clock that evening Benny and I had just come back from dinner. We eat dinner together as a group, me, him, Paul, and a couple of other guys. Today it was just Benny and me because Paul has a night class on Wednesdays, and we had gone to eat at the dining hall, yet another place that always put me in a bad mood. I don't go with Benny because I like him, it's just nice to not eat alone. I'll just not eat if I have to, rather than eat alone. Benny eats with me because he likes to be with me.

There was a message on our answering machine. Benny pushed the button that played the message:

"This message is for Benny Krugman,--"

I talked over the message, "Oh yeah, *Faux* called this morning."

"Benny you need to send us a new copy of the article for the June edition. The transmission got garbled at the end..."

"You should really call and confirm your faxes when they are this close to the deadline." I told him. Hey, I know my fax etiquette.

Benny shushed me sharply. It was unlike him and I didn't like it.

"You should really call and confirm your faxes when they are this close to the deadline," the machine said.

"See?" I shrugged. Benny glared at me some more.

"Anyway, we needed it by five o'clock, but I'll stay an extra hour tonight if you can send it to me. You have until six o'clock." The caller hung up. It was 5:17. I like to be really

specific about the time. Five-seventeen is different that five-fifteen. Sometimes two minutes makes a big difference.

Benny didn't need two minutes, he started up my computer and turned on the modem. At 5:26 everything was fine. Benny shut down my terminal. I was reading for my stupid Brit. Lit class.

With the corner of my eye I watched Benny pick up the phone, and then put it down. He fished around his desk for a scrap of paper, found it, read the number off of it and picked the phone back up.

I turned over and faced the other way. He was distracting me from Dr. Faustus, which believe me, is not a hard thing to do. If he had any courtesy at all he would have made his phone call from the public phone in the hallway. Even though I didn't want to, listening to Benny's conversation was more interesting that Faustus' boring dealings with the devil, so I listened in. Like I said, some people have no idea when it is OK to talk.

"Hello is Bethany there... Hi Beth.... This is Benny.... Did you get that OK this time?... What happened to the last one?... Garbled?... OK.... I'll be sure to... Yes, I'll call right away next time... You did?... This morning... " Benny's voice suddenly changed, became very somber. "Thanks Beth... I'll do that... You saved my life... I owe you, I know.... No... I have to go... OK... Bye bye." Benny hung up.

The room was deathly silent. I could feel Benny looking at my back. It was a different kind of look for Benny. I could tell, without turning to face him, that he was looking at me a different way than he ever had before. I continued to try and read, which was impossible with Benny's eyes piercing my back. The room was maddeningly quiet for about four more minutes, and then Benny stood up. "If you ever pull that again..." Benny said in a low angry voice to my back, "I'll make you sorry." He turned and left. He didn't even slam the door when as he closed it.

V.

"If you ever pull that again, I'll make you sorry?" Paul laughed between bites of turkey croissant. "What was it that you pulled?"

"I don't know," I said to Paul. "I guess he meant about forgetting his message. He forgets a lot of my messages."

"Sure, but not the important ones."

"I just forgot that's all."

"You should write it down next time. I'd kill you too if I lost a job because of carelessness on your part."

"It's not my job though Paul. I don't get paid to take his messages."

"True. *Faux* should have probably called back sooner, too." Paul stood up brushing his mouth with a napkin. Paul always waited till he was completely done eating before he wiped his mouth. "Anyway, I have to get going. I have to type a paper in the lab this afternoon." Paul crumpled up his trash and tossed it as he left the lunchroom.

"Sure Paul," I said to no one in particular. I threw away my unfinished sandwich as I went to class 32 minutes early. Nobody was there so I sat alone for 25 minutes. Paul sure doesn't know how to schedule his time very well, I thought as I sat and listened to my stomach growl.

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